

Be ambitious

Our position: If the president truly wants energy conservation, he will be bolder.

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President George W. Bush's recent appeal for Americans to drive less, and his order for federal agencies to save energy, are a welcome change from his administration. After all, Vice President Dick Cheney said in 2001 that "conservation may be a sign of personal virtue, but it cannot be the basis of a sound energy policy."

But Mr. Bush needs to think much bigger and bolder. He needs to set an ambitious national goal for cutting oil consumption.

Any progress toward such a goal not only would ease the upward pressure on oil prices. It would reduce the United States' dangerous dependence on oil from unstable or hostile regimes. It would bring down the trade deficit. And it would counter calls to drill in environmentally sensitive areas such as off Florida's coast.

The obvious place to target for reducing oil use is transportation, which accounts for two-thirds of this country's consumption. With widespread use of hybrid electric vehicles and fuel from alternative sources, the United States could cut its oil use 12 million barrels a day by 2025 -- more than half of projected imports that year, according to Set America Free, a bipartisan coalition that includes national-security and energy-policy experts.

Hybrid vehicles, which run on a combination of gasoline and battery power, can improve fuel efficiency by a third or more. Hybrids driven less than 20 miles a day that can be plugged in for recharging are even more efficient, reducing gas consumption by 85 percent. Less than 2 percent of U.S. electricity is generated from petroleum, so plug-ins don't exchange one kind of oil dependence for another.

Manufacturing flexible fuel vehicles that can run on any combination of gas and cleaner-burning ethanol or methanol -- a modification that costs about \$150 per vehicle -- also can save oil. Ethanol can be produced from crops, methanol from natural gas, coal or agricultural waste. A flexible fuel, plug-in hybrid running on 80 percent ethanol or methanol could get up to 500 miles per gallon of gas, according to Set America Free.

The coalition advocates a four-year, \$12 billion plan to spur the production and purchase of more fuel-efficient vehicles, and the manufacture and distribution of alternative fuels. That's a big investment, but the payoff could be huge.

Other steps that would cut America's oil dependency include higher fuel-efficiency standards for cars and trucks and greater investments in mass transit.

Earlier this year, the White House balked at a timid Senate proposal to reduce U.S. oil consumption 1 million barrels per day by 2015. But that was before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hammered oil facilities in the Gulf of Mexico and sent prices skyward.

The president's about-face on conservation gives reason to hope he can be persuaded to set an ambitious goal for cutting oil consumption. America would be stronger for it.

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